

Menicon Co., Ltd.

The Reason Why Culture is Essential for Corporate Management

People Who Do Not Appreciate Art Should Not Become Managing Staff

[Menicon Co., Ltd.](#) is the first company to have successfully developed corneal contact lenses in Japan, and continues to be the nation's largest contact lens manufacturer. Mr. Hidenari Tanaka, the company's Chairman and CEO [at the time of the interview], says with absolute certainty:

“Art is absolutely necessary for corporate management. People who do not appreciate art should not become managing staff. They should not occupy a position to lead a company.”



Mr. Hidenari Tanaka, Chairman and CEO of Menicon. Co., Ltd.

Since taking office as the second president at the youthful age of 40 in 2000, he has also been actively involved in cultural projects such as the [Menicon Super Concert](#). In 2012, the company renovated its head office building and opened the art-exhibiting space [Gallery Menio](#) as well as the multi-purpose hall [HITOMI Hall](#). In 2023, the company opened [Menicon Theater Aoi](#), an authentic art theater equipped with an orchestra pit.

In an interview with Mr. Tanaka, who is also serving as chairman of [Creative Link Nagoya](#), an organization that supports cultural and artistic activities in Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture, the author asked about the significance of companies focusing on cultural projects and how he visualizes Nagoya's future.

Not something to be promoted just because we could afford to

Menicon Theater Aoi is a few minutes' walk from Chikusa Station, where trains on JR Tokay Chuo Line and the Municipal Subway Line stop, located on Hirokoji-dori Street, which has been Nagoya's main street of since the Edo period. The theater lobby on the first floor, which also has a café serving dishes made with local ingredients, is equipped with a street piano, where mini concerts are regularly held free of charge.



Theater Aoi viewed from Hirokoji-dori Street

Theater Aoi is compact, with only 301 seats, but surprisingly it has an orchestra pit. It is also equipped with mechanisms such as a lifting and lowering device on the stage (known as a "seri"), which shows the theater's determination to provide a high-quality viewing experience without any thought of profit.

Mr. Tanaka notes: "Actually, it cost more than I had expected to build the theater. But culture is not something to be promoted just because we could afford to. Regardless of whether we could afford to invest or not, as long as we think about how we can get involved in culture, it will make a difference to our life. I believe that makes our life more meaningful."

Mr. Tanaka, who is also active as a scriptwriter and has been involved in the production of radio dramas, said with a smile: "Actually, I created the theater partly because I wanted to use it. And when we opened HITOMI Hall in 2012, the company was not yet listed on the stock exchange, so it was quite easy to do." But this does not mean these initiatives were set in motion just for fun or as a hobby. The fact that the company rebuilt its management after the collapse of Japan's bubble economy and successfully made a stock market debut on the First Section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in 2015 shows that Mr. Tanaka has not neglected the company management side of things.

Approach leads to contribution to society

Mr. Tanaka is clear when he says, "The first requirement of business should be its sustainability," so what is the reason behind Mr. Tanaka's intensive focus on culture? One of the answers was found in the Gallery Menio art exhibition space. Known as an art space that touches the heart of manufacturing, this space also has sculptures and other works by the founding family on display. According to Mr. Tanaka, it is a place to demonstrate their policy regarding *monozukuri* (manufacturing) as a manufacturer, which is to "make better products and deliver them to customers."

Mr. Tanaka continues: "A corporate philosophy is also a part of culture. If this philosophy does not permeate each and every employee, it will not be passed on to younger generations. Passing something down is what creates our history. This began not with the company's founding, but long before that, and can be said to be deeply related to Japanese culture. It's about identity. By knowing our culture, we become able to send messages about what we are and what we should be. This is also the best business tool."

Mr. Tanaka emphasizes that what counts most in business is based on human relationships, which is not about describing product specifications in detail but building mutual trust. According to him, if you can get across your cultural background to others as a manufacturer, then the quality of the products reflecting that "identity" will naturally be conveyed to them.

"I believe that people who can talk about what they have treasured with pride," Mr. Tanaka says, "no matter how small or trivial that might be, will not tell a lie. That's why we want to create places to know our culture, and that's the purpose of operating our theaters and galleries. We are operating them to deliver messages and for promotion as a company, and while our main focus is not on 'making a social contribution', I think our approach has led to making a social contribution as a result."

Theaters give people courage

Mr. Tanaka continues: "To build a trusting relationship, it is important to let people know about our culture and to learn about their culture at the same time. That's why we encourage employees to obtain the qualification of a wine expert. Studying wine also means studying the area around wine and its history. Learning the history of regions is important for selling products worldwide."



It may sound like an off-the-wall idea, but since *terroir*, the characteristics of the land in which wine is produced, is seen as important, studying wine may be a good way to learn about the climate of a particular region from experience. Mr. Tanaka jokes: "Actually, since I love wine, I simply think it would be helpful if there were wine experts within the company." While speaking enthusiastically about the company's philosophy with a serious look reflecting his strong will, Mr. Tanaka also shows an open-hearted nature with such jokes.

A theater is also an ideal place to learn about other cultures. Theater Aoi was built under the theme of providing a place where everyone involved can feel "I am the main character," with a long-term goal of allowing people with disabilities and those whose native language is not Japanese to enjoy the theater experience. Mr. Tanaka emphasizes that when we think of people with disabilities, it is important to put ourselves in their shoes.

He explains: "The other day, we invited a couple with visual and hearing impairments to give a lecture to our employees. They live by covering each other's senses, but I was impressed by how positively they viewed their disabilities as they said: 'We were able to meet thanks to our disabilities.' Our concept of Theater Aoi is to 'see with all five senses.' For example, someone might have lost their sight or hearing, but we want them to enjoy their life instead of continuing to feel depressed."

Looking back on their past efforts, while he recognizes that there will be a long way to go before they can hold concerts for people with disabilities, Mr. Tanaka hopes that concerts for people with hearing difficulties are within reach. Because of Menicon is a manufacturer of contact lenses that correct vision, this is a sincere attempt to get close to the lives of people who have lost their sight or hearing. Mr. Tanaka expresses his hope, saying: "Our theaters might be able to give courage to those people."

A town abuzz with the chatter of happy children

"Where there is culture," Mr. Tanaka says, "people gather. When people gather, a town is formed, people in the town create culture, and the culture nurtures people. Therefore, culture is absolutely essential."

This attitude of learning about our own history and considering the positions of others centers around the word "culture." Therefore, it is for the sake of a town and people living there that Menicon places importance on culture. At the conclusion of the interview with Mr. Tanaka, who is also serving as chairman of Creative Link Nagoya, an organization that supports cultural and artistic activities in Nagoya City, the author asked about his vision for the town of Nagoya itself.



At the theater lobby

Mr. Tanaka replied: "Of course, I would like towns to work on education so that children can absorb culture. It's not about academic performance. I didn't get good grades in art or music [laughs]. Rather, what I mean by that is a town where children can play freely using their five senses. A town abuzz with the chatter of happy children. That's my ideal town."

The culture that a town cherishes makes it possible to raise children with freedom, creating a town where people respect each other's cultures and trust each other. That is the future that Menicon "sees."

After the interview

During the interview, I had the opportunity to attend a performance at Theater Aoi. The luxurious experience of being in a space where I could feel even the breath of the performers on my skin was truly stimulating to all five senses. In his greeting as chairman of Creative Link Nagoya, Mr. Tanaka said, "The foundation of business lies in management and in the science of analyzing data, but culture is also an extremely important element." This was neither a simple celebration of art nor a topical gimmick to attract customers, but rather an intellectual evaluation of the necessity of culture that came across strongly during the interview. I felt very reassured to hear such comments from a manager who has led an industry-leading first-class company.

Mecenat writer: Kosuke Shimizu

Menicon Co., Ltd./Menicon Art and Culture Memorial Foundation

- Date of interview: Wednesday, December 27, 2023
- Place of interview: Head Office of Menicon Co., Ltd. (21-19, Aoi 3, Naka Ward, Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture, Japan)